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Again on the Revolutionary Subject: Problematising Class and Subalternity in *Gramsci on Tahrir*

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As visible in Gilbert Achcar's recourse to the famous 'morbid symptoms' quip to characterise the post-Arab uprisings interregnum in the Middle East and North Africa (2016), critical scholars are increasingly returning to Gramsci to address the complex tapestry of transformation and continuity characterising the region. Brecht De Smet's *Gramsci on Tahrir: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Egypt* is perfectly timed in this regard. Indeed, Gramsci becomes an inescapable reference point whenever one is confronting periods of organic crisis (1971, 210-18), and the historical reality that sees them resolved in a way that demonstrates 'capitalism's historical stubbornness and agility' (De Smet 2016, 6). De Smet firmly places this consideration within the classical Marxian dynamic of crisis, revolution and transformation, and more specifically into how in the Egyptian case the trajectory typical of capitalist modernity is complicated by recurrent deflections of the revolutionary pressures generated by the fetters on the development of productive forces.

Gramsci's conceptual constellation offers invaluable guidance to address the determinants of these deflections, and De Smet draws especially on two key Gramscian concepts. Functioning as 'the conceptual antipode to permanent revolution' (De Smet 2016, 6), passive revolution is at the centre of *Gramsci on Tahrir*, deployed as 'a methodological searchlight' (ibid, 69) to investigate the vagaries of the Egyptian social formation and its political economy. The focus on passive revolution is complemented with reference to the other supremely deflectionary concept in Gramsci's work, that of Caesarism, presented as an 'additional, yet indispensable, conceptual tool' (ibid, 142), needed to address the specific forms of agency through which revolutionary pressures and demands are partly fulfilled and simultaneously displaced in a process of revolution-restoration.

Against a tendency to see passive revolution and Caesarism as isolated from conditions and patterns of capital accumulation on a global scale, De Smet's account of the formation and transformation of the Egyptian political economy is adequately inserted in such scale. This is a first significant contribution of *Gramsci on Tahrir*, consistent with recent research highlighting the global presuppositions and outlook informing Marx's own analysis of the capitalist mode of production (Pradella 2014), and is achieved in two ways. On the one hand,

the first part of the book creates a much broader canvas, necessary to illustrate the nature and content of the main concepts within the context in which they originated, and simultaneously exploring how they might transcend it. In this part, De Smet takes us on a tour across time and space from revolutionary France to Italian Risorgimento to state formation in late developing countries. In and of itself, this effort allows the reader to 'de-Orientalise' the case of Egypt, by highlighting the shaping influence of world historical trends, while at the same time leaving significant latitude for difference in the individual trajectories of 'deflected permanent revolution' (De Smet 2016, 149-56). On the other hand, this world historical perspective constantly informs De Smet's account of the last two centuries of Egyptian history from Mohammad Ali to Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. De Smet's methodology differs from Achcar's approach in *The People Want* (2013), which moves from the identification of 'the peculiar modalities of capitalism in the Arab region' (2013, 53-96), to then analyse how these generated the preconditions for the uprisings in relative isolation from transformations on the global scale. In this regard, De Smet's implicitly scalar approach is especially productive. This is nowhere clearer than in his analysis of the neoliberal era, which leads him to the conclusion that (De Smet 2016, 226):

Egypt's dependent 'crony capitalism' is not the opposite of the Western neoliberal myth, but its broken mirror, reflecting 'lean' production as deindustrialization and unemployment and flexibility as informality and precariousness. The essence of neoliberalism shines through the broken reflection of its Egyptian appearance.

In addition to providing greater dynamism to his analysis, the insertion of Egyptian history within global history allows De Smet to resist the postcolonial tendency to particularise everything, thus reducing the scope for the identification of general trends (Chibber 2013).

This very attention to the articulation of global and national dynamics underpins another of the contributions of De Smet's analysis: the acknowledgement that 'outside the core capitalist countries *modern* Caesarism is in fact a bastard form of *classical* Caesarism, which was still fighting an epochal struggle against feudalism' (2016, 103). Hence, Nasser's modernising role within the Egyptian social formation is more akin to Napoleon's progressive Caesarism than to the modern Caesarism of Mussolini in fascist Italy (ibid, 154). This locally progressive outcome, which despite considerable resort to repression implemented 'political and social reforms that even went beyond the traditional "tasks" of the bourgeois revolution' (ibid), was still fundamentally limited from a world historical perspective, as it 'merely

reconfigured existing historical blocs in line with the contemporary form of capitalism' (ibid, 155). Through this analysis, De Smet is thus able to illustrate the merits and limits of Nasserism in relation to both the Egyptian social formation and the modalities of its insertion in capitalism as a tendentially global mode of production.

De Smet's nuanced appreciation of the merits and limits of Nasserism within the Egyptian social formation is related to his Hegelian twist to Gramsci's understanding of the relation between state and civil society. Nasser's Caesarism is progressive insofar as it replaces a *mechanical* relation between state and society, whereby different social groups exist 'in political and social separation from each other' (ibid, 86), with a *chemical* relation, where this separation is at least formally overcome. Its reactionary character is instead to be found in its inability to develop an *organic* relation between state and society, as Nasser's 'Caesarist intervention [...] substituted its own authoritarian direction for the embryonic hegemony of the subaltern alliance', and hence 'replaced organic subaltern prefiguration by a chemical state' (ibid, 158).

Another valuable contribution in *Gramsci on Tahrir* relates to De Smet's attempt to combine the dominant outcome-centred or 'objectivist' account of revolutions with a 'subjectivist' approach that lends a greater role to the revolutionary process and its agents. This builds on De Smet's earlier work on 'the *formation* of collective agency' and the role of dialectical pedagogy in it (2014, 26). This contribution focuses on this specific point, in order to highlight the potential, arguably underexplored in *Gramsci on Tahrir*, that Gramsci's emphasis on superstructures holds for understanding the myriad subjectivities characterising the Egyptian revolutionary front. This renewed emphasis on superstructures holds significant implications in two directions. On the one hand, it alerts us to the importance of ideological and political factors in defusing structural pressures. An appreciation of these factors warns us further against the risks of 'economism', of which Gramsci was acutely aware, and the attendant risk of assuming, rather than probing, the centrality of class in the formation of the revolutionary subjects. One could indeed argue that some components of the revolutionary front never saw themselves as part of subaltern classes at all. From a Gramscian perspective, this raises the question of the range of subjects towards which the working class should aim to become hegemonic. On the other hand, superstructures also matters in a productive, performative, sense, insofar as they provide a terrain on which a coherent and cohesive subaltern bloc can emerge. Here, one must resist the temptation of overstating the grounds for a durable alliance between the civil-democratic and the social 'souls' of the Egyptian revolution. For this reason, I suggest that one should take more seriously Gramsci's scepticism

towards Trotsky's thesis of 'permanent revolution', and – following Thomas (2015) – explore the central role of hegemony in realising what Marx and Engels called 'revolution in permanence' in the wake of the disappointments of 1848 in Germany (1978: 287). The emphasis here is once more on the importance of organisational and ideological elements, and the effects they hold for the temporality of the social revolution. Indeed, a focus on these elements is essential for overcoming the limitations of subaltern agency seen in the first junctures of the revolution. Such limitations are also at the heart of Gramsci's understanding of passive revolution, and must equally be at the heart of any analysis of the counter-revolution.

Class and its limits in revolutionary subject(s) formation

Gramsci on Tahrir's attempt to develop a subjectivist approach to better capture revolution as a process starts from exploring the limitations of the objectivist tradition that has long dominated the study of revolutions. De Smet identifies Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* as paradigmatic in this tradition, insofar as it focuses 'on the documented externalizations – societal transformations – of the revolutionary subjects' (2015, 74). This outcome-centred approach implies 'successful change as a basic defining feature' of social revolutions (Skocpol 1979, 4). However, as De Smet notes, if success is a necessary condition in defining revolutions, the concept of unsuccessful or failed revolution 'becomes nonsensical' (2016, 74). Hence, to look at revolutions that failed or were not completed, one must go beyond outcome, and develop an approach aimed at capturing 'a process that encapsulates the *effort, intention, expectation, and prefiguration* towards a revolutionary outcome' (ibid).

De Smet's critique undoubtedly stands on firm ground. It is also for this reason that his elaboration of a subjectivist account is somewhat underwhelming, and appears itself as an unfinished revolution in the study of revolutions. Echoes of De Smet's earlier work, where he draws on the well-known quote from *The Holy Family*,¹ are also visible in *Gramsci on Tahrir*, with the ensuing tendency to assume, as opposed to assess and probe, the centrality of class in revolutionary subject formation. This is visible for instance in how De Smet presents the move towards a subjectivist study of revolutions, which 'reorients the investigation from the "basic transformations of a society's state and class structures" towards the dynamic of "class-based revolts from below"' (2016, 78). Now, whereas revolutionary processes inevitably have

¹ 'It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do' (Marx and Engels 1975, 37, quoted in De Smet 2014, 69).

a class dimension, one might wonder whether this is necessarily understood as such at the level of superstructures by the subjects directly involved in the revolution. This point is not inconsequential, and especially so from a subjectivist perspective aiming at recovering revolutionary agents and their lived experience. The ways in which subjectivity is perceived, by both specific subjects and those interacting with them, is essentially performative and produces real effects, no matter how flimsy its material grounding might be. For though capital is inherently totalising, it does not subsume all other social relations totally, and, 'at the level of historical practice [it] only ever has a partial grip on history'. Hence, the transformative power of capital should be contextualised in articulation 'with non-capitalist economic forces and non-economic social forces', and ultimately 'in connection with relatively autonomous social practices' (Albritton 1999, 170, 179). If this applies to the logic of capital as it becomes historically concrete, it must also apply to the range of subjects existing in a capitalist social formation. Largely peripheral in *Gramsci on Tahrir*,² Gramsci's concept of 'common sense' provides a powerful tool for grasping how different social groups define themselves *vis-à-vis* other groups and the social formation as a whole (Gramsci 1971, 326f). Crucially, engagement with common sense is a fundamental stepping stone of the road to subaltern hegemony (ibid, 328). After all, Gramsci noted, 'it is on the level of ideologies that men become conscious of conflicts in the world of the economy' (ibid, 162).

This shift in emphasis is not to suggest that De Smet indulges in class reductionism. Indeed, *Gramsci on Tahrir* often refers to social groups that cannot be immediately understood in class terms, such as for instance the army (2016, 140-1), and the various components of the revolutionary front in the eighteen days leading to Mubarak's overthrow (ibid, 186-9). However, this nuance is not always present when De Smet examines the quest for hegemony among revolutionary forces. Here, if one expects the working class to 'establish its hegemony over the revolution' (ibid, 204), it becomes imperative to ask who are the prospective subjects of this hegemony. Answering this question entails again exploring the variety of subjects involved in the revolutionary front, perhaps also to discover that some of them lie beyond the reach and scope of a subaltern bloc under the hegemony of the working class.

Abdelrahman's *Egypt's Long Revolution* (2014) explores the range of subjectivities characteristic of Egyptian protest movements in the decade preceding the 2011 uprisings. Abdelrahman identifies three streams of mobilisation, revolving respectively around pro-democracy activism, labour struggles, and citizen-based protests. While drawing from

² Although it must be noted that, in relation to philosophy of praxis and good sense, common sense plays a significant role in De Smet's *A Dialectical Pedagogy of Revolt* (2014, 91-101).

various social groups in terms of their own composition, each of these groups was largely grounded in a specific social milieu. Kefaya, for instance, arguably the key organisation of the pro-democracy movement, 'was a decidedly middle-class movement with no mass base beyond its narrow support among urban, middle-class professionals, intellectuals and students' (2014, 39). This also shaped its demands, which were by and large 'fuelled by the grievances of middle-class professionals against a regime that had systematically reneged on the state's post-1952 social contract with its urban, educated population and by their growing aversion to the regime's increasing use of violence to protect its existence' (ibid). Even though the middle class in itself is a somewhat vague referent, as it simply 'finds itself between a top class, comprising the elite, and a lower class, comprising the masses' (Luciani 2007, 163), the self-identification as middle class of specific social strata has social and political implications. Two of them are more pertinent here. Firstly, in terms of the demands they articulated, 'pro-democracy activists were seen, and saw themselves, as striving solely for political liberties and rights' (Abdelrahman 2014, 117), in the attempt of defining 'a hierarchy of struggles' (Abdelrahman 2012). Secondly, whenever these groups demonstrated some form of economic awareness, this would usually be articulated along vocational lines, as witnessed by the rise of a range of independent professional associations and unions, from tax collectors to judges to journalists, emerging before, during and after the uprisings. This vocational nature of solidarity betrays an approach of an 'economic-corporate' nature (Gramsci 1971, 181), which struggles to go beyond these rather narrow limits. Indeed, prior to January 25, it was the perception of belonging to the middle class that provided the glue for solidarity within the pro-democracy movement, as 'cross-ideological cooperation, joint coordination of activities, and cross-fertilization among different groups of activities remained firmly within the boundaries of the middle-class pro-democracy movement' (Abdelrahman 2014, 117). This inevitably produced a chasm, with its attendant feeling of mutual suspicion, between pro-democracy protesters and workers, which provided yet another obstacle to the creation of a coherent subaltern bloc, despite sporadic attempts to create bridges between the political and the economic dimension, for instance on the part of Tadamon and the 6 April movement. According to Abdelrahman, these attempts failed also because 'the almost exclusively middle-class background of their members meant that these groups adopted a paternalistic approach when attempting to mobilize people for political and social action' (ibid, 128).

In light of this disposition within the pro-democracy – or, in De Smet's terminology, civil-democratic – movement, one might want to ask whether some of these groups might be considered, and might want to consider themselves, subaltern at all, and subsequently see

whether social emancipation was part of their agenda at all. This point becomes especially salient if one looks at the discursive centrality acquired by 'the people' in the demands raised in Tahrir and beyond (Ismail 2011; 990-94; Achcar 2013, 13-14; De Smet 2014, 21-27). The marked preference in the pro-democracy movement for a purely political platform, where 'the people' are largely equated with 'citizens', implies a revolutionary struggle revolving around juridical equality, along a typically liberal line of argument. This suggests an intention to eschew considerations regarding socio-economic power, which are instead quintessential to any definition of subalternity. In the Egyptian case, this approach also clashes with the radically redistributive demands put forward by the workers' movement, which in turn 'has yet to articulate a democratic agenda of its own' (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014, 13). A similar conceptual ambiguity also plagues the use of 'the youth' as another major signifier within the pro-democracy group, which – although based in the specific socio-economic reality of mass youth unemployment and underemployment (Achcar 2013, 40-43) – similarly conceals major differentiations rooted in class, gender and status.

All of these fissures within the revolutionary front appear to militate against the emergence of working class hegemony, and from a Gramscian perspective demand a renewed focus on the relation between the material determinants of the positions of specific subjects and their superstructural manifestations. In broad outline, this can be understood as a two-fold process. On the one hand, it requires an examination of 'the material conditions of life' that generate specific subjectivities, which cannot be grasped 'by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind' (Marx 1987, 262). On the other hand, however, it also demands that hegemony be built upon engagement with the ideologies permeating a social formation, and with its specific common sense, so as to identify 'the healthy nucleus' within it, 'which can be called "good sense" and which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1971, 328).

This call to pay more sustained attention to the role of superstructures in subject formation must remain firmly grounded in historical materialist terrain, avoiding the trap of subjectivity as pure discursivity. In this regard, the emphasis on superstructures provides a helpful tool to be nested within Marx's own method of non-deductive concretisation (Callinicos 2009, 80-82), sensitising us to some of the non-deductive elements to be taken into account when looking at concrete historical instances of the capitalist mode of production. In this part I have sketched how this can help us highlight a variety of obstacles to the immanent hegemonic potential of the working class within the embryonic subaltern bloc in Egypt. In the

next section, I look more directly at what this might entail for the dynamic and direction of the Egyptian revolution.

‘Permanent revolution’ and ‘revolution in permanence’ in Egypt

The intimate connection between political and social revolution is taken by De Smet as characteristic of permanent revolution. Political revolution ‘*cannot* go beyond political emancipation without losing its bourgeois character’ (2016, 80), while ‘the historical form of the social revolution is the proletarian revolution, which *has* to go beyond political emancipation in order to liberate the working class from its social conditions’ (ibid). This tension towards overcoming the merely political dimension of emancipation ‘creates a *permanent* dynamic’ (ibid). A major implication of this permanent dynamic is that ‘every modern political revolution that is the outcome of popular initiative is essentially an *incomplete* revolution of which the social soul remains undeveloped’ (ibid, 82).

In the specific Egyptian context, the civil-democratic movement and the workers’ movement are identified as the main agents of the Egyptian revolution. Indeed, ‘[t]he convergence of the two processes led to the fall of Mubarak: the popular masses moving from Tahrir to Parliament and the presidential palace, and the powerful entrance of workers as class actors in the revolution’ (ibid, 200). This consideration allows De Smet to bring to bear the potential of his subjectivist approach, insofar as ‘[r]evolution is not merely an instrument for accomplishing societal change: it is the movement itself towards a transformation of society’ (ibid). To achieve this transformation, and thus ‘successfully integrate the moments of political and social emancipation, the popular masses would have to construct a means of exercising power, through which, in turn, the working class could establish its hegemony over the revolution’ (ibid, 204). As outlined above, however, this relation between the national-popular and the proletarian elements in the Egyptian revolution was rife with tensions and contradictions, thus rendering more problematic the integration of political and social instances.

If in the section above the focus was on the disregard of vast parts of the civil-democratic movement for the socio-economic demands raised by workers, it would be all too easy to identify limitations in workers’ agency. Nonetheless, this is essential in the face of the rampant counter-revolution, which has seen the return of strategies of the Mubarak era, with the working classes facing an unremitting wave of repression and the embryonic links between civil-democratic and social movement severed through divide-and-rule.

The troubles in subaltern agency are visible also in the most advanced outposts of workers' organisations, such as the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), which – with the aid of adequate political organs – could 'have played an important role in the formation of popular power' (ibid, 204). However, even EFITU's demands – from renationalising privatised companies to establishing minimum and maximum wage to addressing corruption – were themselves trapped in the economic-corporate moment, and failed to articulate a clear political agenda. While undoubtedly part of a social struggle, these demands fall well short of constructing the foundations of working class hegemony over the revolutionary process, and hence fulfilling the social soul of the revolution. The explanation for this failure partly depends on sheer numbers, as independent trade unions 'were too small in relation to the scale of the movement for their presence as an organised force to shape the overall outcome of the uprising, or even to influence its direction much' (Alexander 2012, 113). These considerations point once more towards ideological and political-organisational limitations – largely but not exclusively dependent on state repression – that made the establishment of working class hegemony over the embryonic subaltern bloc especially arduous. It is thus appropriate to shift the emphasis once more to the level of superstructures.

This focus brings to the fore another layer of complications that, while perhaps not dispelling the possibility of permanent revolution altogether, tend to dilute its temporality. In this regard, one must not forget Gramsci's extreme scepticism towards the Trotskyist thesis. While one might maintain that 'much of Gramsci's polemic is not only unfair, but also at times close to a puzzling misattribution' (Thomas 2015, 295), it also contains an important kernel of Gramsci's understanding of politics after 1870, when 'the internal and international organisational relations of the State become more complex and massive, and the Forty-Eightist formula of the "Permanent Revolution" is expanded and superseded by the formula of "civil hegemony"' (Gramsci 1971, 243). While Gramsci is here primarily referring to modern democracies, the international dimension recalled above suggests that these processes are bound to reverberate, however refracted and distorted, also in colonial and post-colonial social formations, which will thus also present 'traces of structuration of the political system' (Ciccarelli 2009, 731). This will in turn, as De Smet suggests, lead 'to the *incorporation* of the war of movement as an element within the war of position' (2016, 84).

If war of position becomes the name of the game, one is then tempted to follow Thomas' considerations on Gramsci's preference for Marx and Engels' formula of 'revolution in permanence' over Trotsky's 'permanent revolution' (2015, 297-301). With the post-1848 German experience in mind, Marx and Engels became increasingly sceptical of the viability of

a model seeing the bourgeois-democratic revolution as the prelude to the proletarian revolution, with the two processes telescoped and compressed into one another (ibid, 298). Rather, they had developed a sense of how a revolution realising demands of political equality around the concept of citizenship would provide a brake, more than an enabler, for the social revolution. Hence, Marx and Engels formulated the need for workers to 'make the revolution permanent' in the awareness that 'German workers are not able to attain power and achieve their own class interests without completely going through a lengthy revolutionary development' (Marx and Engels 1978, 286). Throughout this development, workers should be pushing 'to the extreme the proposals of the democrats' (ibid), while simultaneously strengthening their independent organisations, in order to resist any attempts to demobilise and disband the revolution, as the conjunctural development might be 'lengthy', but also remains 'revolutionary'. Thus, their battle cry would become 'the revolution in permanence' (ibid, 287), with permanence 'understood not simply as continuous temporal development, but also as endurance, in an almost Machiavellian sense' (Thomas 2015, 297).

This tension towards the permanence of the revolution, as implied in Gramsci's view of hegemony as expansion and supersession of permanent revolution, must manifest itself in political and civil society. This entails going beyond the mere advance of working class interests in economic-corporate form, and towards a hegemonic project that draws in other subaltern classes. While the structuration and stratification of political and civil society in Egypt might be incommensurate to the most advanced social formations, it still has fundamental effects for political strategy, as it foreshadows a third solution beyond socialism and barbarism to the organic crisis of the Egyptian social formation: revolution-restoration (De Smet 2016, 227). As the possibility for passive revolution heightens, any advance must be 'preceded by long ideological and political preparation' (Gramsci 1971, 110).

In ideological terms, again, a significant part of this preparatory work involves sustained engagement with the common sense of the day, in order to identify the 'healthy nucleus' of 'good sense'. This would establish the foundations for increasing awareness of the manifold forms of exploitation existing in a social formation, and establishing how they relate to 'conflicts in the world of the economy'. This is an inescapable juncture on the road to establishing working class hegemony over other subaltern classes. This is also the point in which the function of intellectuals is most crucial, as 'the intellectual element "knows" but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel', whereas 'the popular element "feels" but does not always know or understand' (ibid, 418). A major task for intellectuals, and an essential component for 'the creation of the "historical bloc"', is thus

developing 'an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive)' (ibid, 418).

In terms of politico-organisational work, the prospect and reality of passive revolution demands a systematic analysis of the contingent situation and attendant relations of force. These 'range from the relations between international forces [...] to objective relations within society – in other words, the degree of development of productive forces; to relations of political force and those between parties [...]; and to immediate (and potentially military) political relations' (Gramsci 1971, 176). It is especially these latter two dimensions (ibid, 113), and how they are overdetermined by international forces (ibid, 116-17), that are of greater analytical importance when passive revolution is on the cards.

Strategically, these general principles can help in the identification of temporary allies, much like the democratic petty bourgeoisie in Germany in 1850, as well as in the construction of a cohesive subaltern social bloc. Analytically, these principles would for instance shed light on the Muslim Brotherhood's inability to realise even the more limited civil-democratic demands of the revolution (De Smet 2016, 214). A focus on common sense, for instance on the powerful role that the army still holds in the national-popular imaginary, combined with less favourable relations of political force, might even help explain the changed disposition of some sections of the middle class. These do not only encompass the *feloul* (Mubarak loyalists), but also members of the so-called *hizb al-kanaba* (party of the sofa), that – after having participated in the 2011 uprisings – woke up from political passivity in June 2013 to demand the army's direct intervention in the political sphere. Understanding these processes and transformations entails an attempt to avoid reading off subjectivity from class, and engage instead in a process of non-deductive concretisation that still aims at making the class referents explicit, analytically and politically at once.

Towards the next organic crisis

In critical dialogue with De Smet's important work, this contribution has highlighted how a more sustained focus on superstructures understood in a Gramscian sense is valuable in two important respects. On the one hand, it helps us make sense of how structural pressures expressed in the 2011 uprisings have been defused and hence created the space for the current counter-revolution. On the other hand, the level of superstructures is also the one in which fissures and bridges between different social strata and classes are manifested, and is thus crucial also in a more productive form for those groups aiming to take on the Sisi regime not only politically, but also on a socio-economic terrain.

The current prospects for subaltern classes in Egypt are undoubtedly bleak, but the regime is not facing much rosier prospects, and for structural reasons. As De Smet suggests, there are severe limitations to the broadening of the material basis of hegemony within the global neoliberal order (2016, 228), which are especially acute for Sisi's counter-revolutionary regime, given its increasing dependence on increasingly less compromising donors, which are driving the regime towards ever more drastic austerity policies. The aftermath of Trump's election, and his early choices for the next US administration, perhaps do not necessarily suggest that neoliberalism is alive and well, but at least signal its reorganisation on the back of a populist discourse in times of a more decentred, yet by no means less imperialist, global order. In this regard, the increased Gulf activism in the Middle East, and more directly in Egypt, might open up a phase in which neoliberalism is not superseded, but is rather regionalised to a greater extent than it already is (Hanieh 2013, 2016).

These recent transformations appear to lend further weight to De Smet's consideration that 'within the context of global neoliberalism national state power is insufficiently grounded in a stable economic structure, and, consequently, an organic crisis is on the horizon' (2016, 219-20). It is on the basis of this awareness that the analytical and political urgency of the superstructural tasks outlined above becomes apparent. And it is in contributing to this task that De Smet's *Gramsci on Tahrir* shines not only as a valuable contribution to academic debates, but also as a fundamental reading for activists and organisers in Egypt and beyond.

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